



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE USE OF SYMBOLS IN RELIGIOUS TEACHING.

THE Bible always takes strong hold on the human heart, if it is given a fair opportunity. The explanation of this is twofold : first, the Bible contains vital truth, and vital truth generally takes hold. But, besides this, the Bible is well constructed pedagogically, that is, it has been given us in a form which more easily than any other appeals directly to the intelligence. We do not forget, of course, that it is of oriental origin ; but, although the oriental characteristics are very many, they are, speaking generally, for that very reason most effective. If, now, this assumption be correct, it follows directly that the methods employed in the presentation of religious truth in Bible times are methods which may well be employed for the same purpose today. In this statement we have had in mind the human, and not the divine, side of the Bible.

*METHODS OF
TEACHING
INDICATED IN
THE BIBLE*

Every human being in its embryonic state is said to pass through all the forms of animal life, from the lowest to the highest, through which man himself has passed in the course of the evolution of which the present man is the outcome. The Bible furnishes us material which has had its origin, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, (a) in connection with the most significant history which the world has yet seen, and (b) in connection with every step of that history, from the lowest form of nomadic life to the highest form of civilized existence. This explains, as nothing else will explain, the universality of the Bible. It appeals to humanity because in the wisdom of God it was given through a humanity which corresponds to the humanity of all times and circumstances. What Jesus Christ was among men, that, to some extent at least, the Hebrew nation has been among nations.

*BIBLE METHODS
UNIVERSAL*

Something was said in former numbers of the BIBLICAL WORLD concerning the use made in biblical literature of the *story* and of the *vision* for purposes of teaching. It was suggested that the presence of these methods in the Bible was an explanation of its power to take hold of men's hearts. It was also suggested that in these two methods we might find suggestions of a most valuable character touching the practical use of the same methods in the work of teaching today. For, if the story was used effectively in ancient times, it surely may be used in present times, especially since everyone recognizes its influence on the human mind. The same thing was said of the vision. The psychological condition which furnished a basis for the vision exists today as it did centuries ago, and the very principles which underlie the vision are principles which, without a knowledge of the fact, modern pedagogy is emphasizing most strongly. If now our general proposition holds good of the story and the vision, it may fairly be asked: Are there not other pedagogical methods employed in the Old Testament of which advantage may be taken today? The answer is, of course, in the affirmative; and one of these is the method employed in connection with what is ordinarily termed *symbols*—that is, symbolical objects and symbolical actions.

In order to open the mind of Jeremiah, in the process of his call to the ministry, certain symbolical objects were presented to his mind's eye and interpreted. There was the almond rod,¹ and then there came the boiling pot.² In earlier times certain symbolical objects had been used in communicating divine truth to Amos, as, for example, the basket of summer fruit.³ In times very much later, again, we find the use of symbolical objects in the dream given Nebuchadnezzar; for as such is to be taken the image, whose parts were of gold, and silver, and brass, and of iron and clay, which he saw and which represented to him kingdoms in this world's history.⁴

¹ Jer. 1:11.³ Amos 8:1.² Jer. 1:13.⁴ Dan. 2:31-35.

Scores of examples of symbolical objects might thus be cited. Going back now for a moment, we may note that the almond tree, which is the earliest of all trees to wake from the sleep of winter, was used as a symbol of the active vigilance with which Jehovah would see to the fulfilment of his promises. The pot of boiling water, with its opening turned toward Jerusalem, made to boil by a fire blazing against it from the north, and with the boiling water thus driven upon the city, is the symbol of the irruption of the kingdoms of the north and the destructive influence of this irruption upon Israel. The basket of summer fruit—that is, the early ripe fruit—is the symbol of the people who are ripe for judgment. The great image of Nebuchadnezzar's dream is a symbol of successive kingdoms and their standing in the world's history.

Very frequently, instead of the presentation of an *object* which should serve as a symbol, there was given an *action*. The actor was himself the preacher. In many cases, to be sure, it is very difficult to draw the line between the object and the action. Isaiah, under command of God, goes barefoot and naked—that is, with his outer garments removed—for three years in order to teach the people, in the midst of whom he thus walked,⁵ that within this length of time Assyria would lead Egypt into captivity. His dress was the dress of a captive. On a certain occasion Jeremiah makes a journey from Jerusalem to the Euphrates⁶ in order to bury his girdle in the ground. The girdle thus buried molds and decays. This action is a symbol of the ruin which is coming upon Judah and Jerusalem. Ezekiel conducts a miniature siege by means of bricks, much in the manner of child-play.⁷ This is the symbol of the great siege of Jerusalem. Ezekiel prepares barley cakes baked with human dung, and eats the same.⁸ This is the symbol of the unclean bread which Israel will eat in the land of her enemies.

**SYMBOLICAL
ACTIONS**

⁵ Isa., chap. 20.

⁶ Jer., chap. 13; but perhaps the text here is corrupt, and the reference is to Ephrathah.

⁷ Ezek. 4: 1 ff.

⁸ Ezek. 4: 12 ff.

A large amount of space might be taken in presenting merely a list of the symbolical actions recorded in Holy Scripture. In many cases they seem to have required months, and even years, for their presentation. No pains were spared, when this method of teaching was employed, to make it most effective.

Perhaps at this point we are able briefly and comprehensively to define a symbol. It is (1) an object, or action, (2) presented in order to teach a lesson, which (3) is connected either in fact or in imagination with the object or action presented. Or we may put it in another form: A symbol is something which, having a real or fancied resemblance to something in the mind of the teacher, is used to suggest vividly the thought with which it thus stands in real or fancied connection. Perhaps we can describe it in still another way: A symbol is something concrete, something tangible, something visible, which is used to suggest something which is not concrete, something which is intangible, or something which is invisible. The symbol is, in other words, an object-lesson; and when we, in these last years, as the result of much investigation concerning principles of teaching, introduce into our class-rooms models, pictures, and maps, we are doing only that which was done many thousand years ago by the great teachers who received a commission from the most high God to teach the world the truth concerning him and his relationship to men.

Two or three things may be said of the use of symbols. (1) It was strictly in accord with oriental customs and modes of thought. The oriental may be described, in comparison with the occidental, as the child-period of national and individual life. It is easily seen, then, why in ancient days as well as in these times the man of the Orient should have a peculiar liking for symbols. But it should be remembered that all child-life is not wholly oriental, and that every person passes through a period of life which corresponds to the oriental. Surely, within these limits, the symbol has its place today as well as in former times. (2) The use of the symbol was not confined to any particular nation. It is found in Egypt, on the one hand;

SOME CHARACTERISTICS

in Assyria and Babylon, on the other. The whole world, as it was then known, recognized and adopted this method of teaching. (3) The purpose of its use is clear, since it enabled the speaker to present truth at the same time more vividly and more impressively. Teaching is successful when in its presentation there is produced a vivid impression. The different degrees of success or failure are dependent upon the degree of impressiveness with which the message is taught. Unless a given teaching produces a sensation (this word is not used in the ordinary sense), it is a failure. The purpose is surely a proper one, and the means proposed may be regarded as legitimate.

Modern teaching, as suggested above, has opened its eyes to the possibilities of the symbolical method. We do not, to be sure, call it by that name; but it remains true that the modern method which includes plays and object-lessons in the lower stages of instruction, maps, charts, and stereopticon in the higher stages of instruction, is, after all, only an adaptation of the old oriental method of which we have abundant illustration in ancient life. There are some teachers who still scorn these helps. Such teachers are doomed. It is in a large measure because these ancient ideas (we are accustomed to call them modern) are employed in our public schools and are not employed in the Sunday school, that the former are so superior to the latter in the character of the work done. It is the old question: Why should not all the senses be employed by the pupil in the heroic effort which he makes to learn? Progress is being made; but it is being made very slowly. In fact, we are in this matter, as perhaps in some other respects, barely keeping pace with the ancients.

The preacher is nothing if he is not a teacher. Failure in the pulpit is due in nine cases out of ten to the fact that the preacher has not the instincts of the teacher. We do not say that the preacher is *only* a teacher. We say that he is *first* a teacher. The greatest preachers the world has ever known were the Old Testament prophets. These, one and all, employed the symbolical method.

SYMBOLS IN
THE CLASS-ROOM

SYMBOLS IN
THE PULPIT

They did not seem to fear that they would be regarded as sensational; they were sensational in the literal sense of the term; and if it is necessary to be sensational in order to reach the minds and hearts of a suffering humanity, what harm is wrought? There is a conservatism in the modern pulpit in reference to method which means dry-rot. The minister stands in fear of his fellow-minister, or in fear of a few sedate members of his flock, and, in order that he may not offend the taste of these proper personages, he denies himself the opportunity of using those very methods which have been used by successful teachers throughout the world's history. The symbol and the vision go hand in hand. They make an appeal to the eye, either the physical eye or the mental eye. In both cases it is the strongest appeal which can be made. In the presentation of religious truth, whether in class-room or in pulpit, the most effective methods, whatever they are, should be adopted, and in the adoption of these methods each and every one will adapt them to his own use. The symbol is universal. This, in fact, is the explanation of the charm which many find in a theater; and it is not irreverent or inexpedient, in view of the fact that the theaters are always full and churches oftentimes empty, even on the sabbath, to ask whether in this matter the church may not learn something from the world.